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William J. Clinton

**Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion
on the 2000 Census in Houston,
Texas**

June 2, 1998

The President. Thank you. Thank you for that wonderful welcome, and thank you, Marta, for the wonderful work you're doing here. I enjoyed my tour. I enjoyed shaking hands with all the folks who work here and the people who are taking advantage of all your services. And I'm glad to be here. Mr. Mayor, you can be proud, and I know you are proud of this center and the others like it in this city.

I'd like to thank all the Members of Congress who are here from the Texas delegation, and a special thanks to Representatives Maloney and Sawyer for coming from Washington with me today, and for their passionate concern to try to get an accurate census.

I thank the Texas land commissioner, Garry Mauro, for being here; and the members of the legislature, Senator Gallegos, Senator Ellis, Congressman—Representative Torres, and others, if they're here, the other city officials; Mr. Boney, the president of the city council; Mr. Eckels, the county executive judge; Rueben Guerrero, the SBA Regional Administrator. If there are others—I think our Deputy Secretary of Commerce, Mr.

Mallett, is here, who is from Houston. I thank you all for being here.

Before I say what I want to say about the census, I think, since this is the first time I have been in Texas since the fires began to rage in Mexico, that have affected you, if you'll forgive me, I'd like to just say a word about that. The smoke and the haze from these fires has become a matter of serious concern for people in Texas and Louisiana, and other Gulf States. It has gotten even further up into our country. And of course, the greatest loss has been suffered by our friends and neighbors across the border in Mexico. Now, we are doing everything we know to do to help, both to help the people of Mexico and to stem the disadvantageous side effects of all the smoke and haze coming up here into the United States.

I had an extended talk with President Zedillo about it. And, of course, here we had the EPA and Health and Human Services and FEMA monitoring the air quality. We're working very hard with the Mexican Government to help them more effectively fight these fires. We provided more than \$8 million in emergency assistance to Mexico since January, with 4 firefighting helicopters, an infrared imaging aircraft to detect fire hotspots, safety, communications, and other firefighting equipment for over 3,000 firefighters. Over 50 experts from our Federal agency have provided important technical advice, and tomorrow, our Agriculture Secretary, Dan Glickman, and our AID Administrator, Brian Atwood, are going to Mexico to see these fires firsthand and to see what else we can do in consultation with Mexican officials.

I think that we will be successful, but this has been a long and frustrating thing. As you probably know, we've had extended fires over the last year in Southeast Asia as well and in South America. This is a terrific problem that requires change in longstanding habits on the part of many people in rural areas in a lot of these countries, but it also is a function of the unusual weather conditions through which we have been living. And we'll continue to work on it.

Now, let's talk about the census. Since our Nation's founding, the taking of the census has been mandated by the Constitution. How we have met this responsibility has changed

and evolved over time as the country has grown in size and population, and as we've learned more about how to count people. Today I want to talk about the newest changes that we propose to make and how important it is to your work and your community. That's why we're here—so that we can put a human face on the census and its consequences.

We do this every 10 years. The first time we had a census, Thomas Jefferson, who was then the Secretary of State, actually sent Federal marshals out on horseback to count heads. We relied on this system of sending workers out to count our people, household by household, person by person, for nearly two centuries. But as the population grew and people began to move more frequently, this process became increasingly both inefficient and ineffective, even as it became progressively more expensive. By the time we finished counting, we'd have to start all over again for the next census.

In 1970, therefore, we started counting people by mail. For three decades now, Americans have been asked to fill out census forms that come in the mail and send them back for processing. Now we know that this method, too, needs to be updated. For a variety of reasons, millions of people, literally millions of people, did not send their 1990 census form back. For the first time, the census in 1990 was less accurate than the one before it. Before that, the census had become increasingly more accurate.

We know now that the census missed 8 million Americans living in inner cities and in remote rural areas. We know, too, interestingly enough, that it double-counted 4 million Americans, many of whom had the good fortune to own 2 homes. *[Laughter]* The number of people not counted in Los Angeles—in Los Angeles alone—was enough to fill a city as big as Tallahassee, the capital of Florida. The census missed 482,738 people in the State of Texas, 66,748 of them here in Houston.

Now, if we are really going to strengthen our country and prepare for this new century, we have to have a full and accurate picture of who we are as a people and where we live. We rely on census statistics every day to determine where to build more roads and

hospitals and child care centers, and to decide which communities need more Federal help for Head Start or Federal training programs, or for the WIC program. Marta and I just visited your WIC program here in this center, and we saw a baby being weighed and measured. The baby liked being weighed more than it liked being measured. I don't blame him. *[Laughter]*

The WIC program is just one example. The Congress, with all the fights that we've had over the last 6 years, we've had pretty good success in getting a bipartisan majority to continue to put more money into the WIC program, because people know that it makes good sense to feed babies and take care of them and provide for them when they're young. But the funds, once appropriated, can only flow where they're needed if there is an accurate count of where the kids are. So, ironically, no matter how much money we appropriate for WIC, unless we actually can track where the children are, the program will be less than fully successful.

Now, more than half of the undercounted in the last census were children. A disproportionate number of undercounted Americans were minorities. That means some of our most vulnerable populations routinely are omitted when it comes time to providing Federal funds for critical services. An inaccurate census distorts our understanding of the needs of our people, and in many respects, therefore, it diminishes the quality of life not only for them but for all the rest of us as well.

That's why we have to use the most up-to-date, scientific, cost-effective methods to conduct an accurate census. That's why—to go back to what Congressman Green said—we should follow the National Academy of Sciences' recommendations to use statistical sampling in the next census.

Scientists and statisticians are nearly unanimous in saying that statistical sampling is the best way to get a full and fair count of our people for the 2000 census. It is estimated that if we use good statistical sampling, supplemented by what are called quality checks, where you go out into selected neighborhoods and actually count heads to make sure that the sampling is working, that we can cut the error rate to a tenth of a percent, or that

in the next sample we would miss, out of a country of nearly 300 million people by then, only 300,000, as opposed to 8 million in the 1990 census.

Now, as far as I know, nobody in this room had anything to do with coming up with this proposal. All of us just want an accurate count. Whatever the count is, wherever the people are, this is not a political issue; this is an American issue. But the people who know what they're doing tell us that this is the way we should do it. There is no serious dispute among the experts here.

It is, therefore, I think, quite unfortunate that some in Congress have so vociferously opposed sampling, because improving the census shouldn't be a partisan issue. It's not about politics; it's about people. It's about making sure every American really and literally counts. It's about gathering fair and accurate information that we absolutely have to have if we're going to determine who we are and what we have to do to prepare all our people for the 21st century.

In Texas, I would think every Republican would be just as interested as every Democrat in seeing that every Texan is counted so that this State does not lose another billion dollars or maybe \$2 or \$3 billion by then, in undercounting in ways that will help you to meet the challenge of your growing population and to seize the opportunities that are out there for all of you.

So that's what we're here for. And all the folks on this panel, I want to thank them in advance for their willingness to be here, because I'm basically just going to listen to them now, give you what I hope will be a fuller picture of what the consequences of this whole census issue are in very stark, clear human terms. But remember, it's not a political issue; it's a people issue. Nobody has got an ax to grind for any method; we should all want the most accurate method. And when it's all said and done, all we should want is to have everyone of us properly, accurately, fairly, and constitutionally counted.

Thank you very much. [Applause] Thank you.

Well, as I said earlier, everybody here, around this panel, has a different perspective on the importance of the census. And I would like to hear some specific illustrations now

about how the census is used and why the accuracy is important. And maybe we should start with Dr. Craven and with Dr. Kendrick—if you could start.

[Dr. Judith Craven, president, United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast in Houston, explained the importance of accurate census numbers to funding for services in the area.]

The President. So this is very important because—so what you're saying is, when United Way funds are distributed, private funds—

Dr. Craven. That's correct.

The President. —you need the census, first of all, to tell you where the problems are, and secondly, to know how much to give.

Dr. Craven. How much to give and how we can leverage what's already being done by the Government, and making sure that Government dollars have come in an equitable amount to leverage and maximize the resources here to deliver those services.

The President. This as an important point because it's something you almost never hear, that because of the work of United Ways all over America, and because of the way they work, and because of the generosity of the American people, if the census is inaccurate, it has an indirect, bad effect on private investment in people, in community needs, as well as on Government investment.

Dr. Kendrick.

[Dr. Mary des Vignes-Kendrick, director, City of Houston Health Department, described how critical accurate census data is to public health and is used as the denominator for a variety of policymaking decisions.]

The President. Thank you very much. Maybe we could be a little more specific about what some of the specific repercussions are, or have been, as a result of the undercount in the 1990 census.

Mr. Moreno, could you respond to that?

[Gilbert Moreno, president and chief executive officer, Association for the Advancement of Mexican-Americans, described the impact that the census will have on the Mexican-American community.]

The President. Dr. Mindiola.

[Dr. Tatcho Mindiola, Jr., director, Center for Mexican-American Studies at the University of Houston, described how areas such as Houston's East End, which are generally poor, have been traditionally undercounted. Dr. Mindiola applauded the President's support of the statistical sampling method for the next census.]

The President. Thank you.
Reverend Clemons.

[Rev. Harvey Clemons, Jr., pastor, Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, described how an accurate and comprehensive census count would help provide the tools needed to bring about community revitalization in hard-to-develop areas which have been traditionally undercounted.]

The President. What about the business community? Ms. Joe, would you like to talk about that?

[Ms. Glenda Joe of Great Wall Enterprises, a marketing, advertising, and public relations firm catering to Asian-American markets and demographics, described how inaccurate census data discourages corporate ventures and investment in the region. She explained that poor census data affected funding allocations for Asian nonprofit organizations. Ms. Joe then noted that the sharp growth of the Asian-American community in the Gulf Coast region of Texas has not been accurately reflected in the census.]

The President. If I might say—this is a problem—this particular problem she has mentioned is a bigger problem with Asian-Americans than with any other minority group, but it is also a general problem in the work that we're trying to do around the country in revitalizing the inner cities.

If you look at the American unemployment rate now, which is about 4.3 percent—it's the lowest it's been since 19—I think '74, '73, something like that, now—and when I became President, the conventional theory among economists—we had these huge arguments, I remember, after I was elected in '92 and before I took office, and we got everybody down around the table at the Governor's Mansion in Little Rock and talked about this. Conventional economic wisdom was that if unemployment dropped much

below 6 percent, you would have terrible inflation, the economy would be in bad shape, and we'd have to run it back up again.

Well, the American people have proved that that's not so, through high levels of productivity and technology. But then you ask yourself, well, how can we keep this economy growing now that—if the national unemployment rate is down to 4.3 percent? How can we grow the economy without inflation? The obvious answer is, go to the places where the unemployment rate is still higher, where people will work for competitive wages, and where they can create markets because they do have money to spend if people invest it there.

So, you see this also in Hispanic communities in places like Los Angeles, where we've put together a \$400 million community development bank to go into these neighborhoods and make small loans to entrepreneurs to start businesses. You see it in these community development banks we've put up in New York and elsewhere.

In New York City the unemployment rate is still almost 9 percent, so obviously there is an enormous opportunity there for growth, and a lot of the unemployed people in New York are Hispanic, African-American, Asians, people from the Caribbean, not counted. So you go and you say, "Well, make me a loan, and I'll go start this kind of business, and there are this thousand many people in my neighborhood and in my market area." And somebody picks up a census and says, "No, there are not, there are only half that many."

So this is a free enterprise issue as well, because I'm convinced that we have an opportunity that we've not had in 30 years to really crack the unemployment and the underemployment problem and the lack of business ownership in inner cities throughout this country. But to do it, even if you have generous and sympathetic bankers and a Government program that says you're supposed to target low-income areas, you've got to know what the market is.

So it's a problem—the one you said is not just specific to you in here, it's a huge general problem throughout America that an accurate count would help. So it actually, I believe, would help us to keep the growth of the economy going and help us to lower the

unemployment rate further by knowing where investment capital could flow.

Let me just ask—and I guess I'd like to start with Dr. Klineberg because he started the Houston area survey—how possible do you think it is to get an accurate survey, and what do you think—what steps need to be taken? And what arguments do you think we could make to the skeptics who say no statistician with a computer can compete with people going around door-to-door and counting heads?

This is a—you know, it's kind of like a—it's not an easy argument to win. You know, the average person, you just come up to somebody and say, "We're here to figure out how many people are in this room. Would you think it would be better to have an expert look in the room and guess or have somebody walk up and down the rows and count?" So we've got to figure out how to—we've got to win this argument with average American people who aren't used to thinking about these sort of things. And we have to prove that we can do it. So maybe we ought to talk about where we go from here. But, Doctor, would you like to say a few things?

[Stephen Klineberg, professor of sociology, Rice University, described how the census was used and why accuracy was important to the work of sociology and political science in understanding America at a time of great demographic change from an amalgam of European nationalities to an amalgam of worldwide nationalities. Rev. Clemons commended the President for his support of statistical sampling, but urged collecting detailed data in the census.]

The President. Let me ask you another way, because this is where I think—obviously, I'm here in part because I was—because I wanted to come here to illustrate the importance of the census. I'm also here in part, to be candid, because the outcome of this battle is not clear. We all know that. That's why Congressman Sawyer and Congresswoman Maloney came all the way from Washington with me today.

And suppose I got all of you, and I put you in a van. We all got in the van; we drove across town; and we stopped at a little real estate office. The people had never had any

contact at all with the census except they always filled out their form—or we stopped in a service station, and we met a couple guys that—they never thought about this issue for 5 minutes. They're not conscious that it affects them at all. How can we convince ordinary citizens in all the congressional districts, whether they're represented by Republicans or Democrats, without regard to party, that statistical sampling will give them a more accurate count than hiring 6 million people to go door to door? What can you say that is consistent with the experience of ordinary working Americans that will make them understand that?

Dr. Mindiola.

Dr. Mindiola. Mr. President, if I were you I would tell them this story. Most Americans, I think the vast majority of Americans go for medical checkups. And during that process, they do a blood test. But when you go get your blood test, the doctor or the nurse does not draw 100 percent of your blood out of your body. They draw a sample. And based upon that sample—*[laughter]*—and based upon that sample, they can tell your cholesterol level, whether you have too much acid in your blood, et cetera, et cetera. And I think in those common, everyday terms, the average American citizen should be able to understand the validity of sampling, because that's a common, everyday experience.

The President. That may go down in history as the Dracula theory of the census. *[Laughter]* That's pretty good, though.

Go ahead, Marta.

[Marta Moreno, director, Magnolia Multi-Service Center, a Woman, Infants, and Children (WIC) program facility, stated the importance of making people feel comfortable with filling out the census form and advocated public service announcements to achieve that goal. She also favored hiring minority groups to participate in data collection for the census.]

The President. Gilbert.

Mr. Moreno. I think that transportation ultimately is one of the most impacted areas, and boy, in Houston if you're sitting in that rush hour traffic, you're going to have our vote, because you're sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic in 100 degree weather.

The President. So you'd make a practical argument.

Mr. Moreno. It is. Houston, as you know, is the fourth fastest growing city in sheer numbers. Dallas is third. The towns in south Texas are growing at an incredible rate, and they're stacked on a very poor highway that links those cities.

The President. We're trying to build you one, though.

Mr. Moreno. Yes, exactly. It's dangerous to drive from San Antonio to Houston on a Sunday night because the traffic is just stacked.

The President. You know, one of the things that I find works sometimes is the analogy to political polling. I mean, most people understand that a poll taken before an election is a statistical sample. And sometimes it's wrong, but more often than not it's right. And there you may only sample a thousand people out of millions of voters. I mean, there are ways to do this, but I just think—I wish you would all think about it because, again—the other point that I think is important that a lot of you have pointed out is that, a lot of people, you can send all the forms you want to their house, and they either won't or can't fill out the forms. And we know that in some cases, almost—and maybe even without an attempt to deceive, people have gotten census forms if they have a vacation home or two homes, so that ironically, the most over-counted people tended to be upper-income people who would be the least likely to benefit from a lot of these investments, and they might have innocently filled out the forms twice, not necessarily wanting to be over-counted, and just done it.

So I think that that's—the other thing is to point out that people are moving all the time, and sometimes people aren't home, and sometimes somebody is home and somebody is not, which means that even if you thought sending out 10 million people to physically count the other 200 and—how many people did you say we were—268 million of us—it may not be physically possible to do. So that even if you could do it, even if we could put 10 or 15 or 20 million people on the street for a couple of months, it might do no more of an accurate job than a very good sample.

The only place I know that probably got a good head count recently—well, you may have seen the press, where they have a much more controlled society, where people don't get to move around on their own, is Iraq, where they shut the whole country down for a day. You remember that? Nobody moves; everybody stays home; kids have to play in front of their house—stay there. That doesn't seem to me to be a practical alternative for us. *[Laughter]*

Glenda.

[Ms. Joe stated that it is necessary to convince citizens that the accuracy derived from statistical sampling serves their self-interest. Rev. Clemons stated that minorities are reluctant to answer the census because they believe the information would do harm rather than good and that reversing that perception was essential for participation. Dr. Mindiola stated that the census is not a political issue and politics should be taken out of it. Dr. des Vignes-Kendrick commended facilities such as the Magnolia Multi-Service Center and underscored the need for accurate census data in order to more fully serve their communities. She stated that if census data can be demonstrated to link service, resources, and opportunity to the community, participation would increase.]

Mr. Moreno. Mr. President, we're about out of time, but we did want to thank you tremendously for your visit to the East End of Houston. This is a real historic visit. It's my understanding that you're the first President since FDR to visit and so——

The President. Is that right?

Mr. Moreno. Hopefully, it won't be that long again.

The President. Thank you. Let me say one other thing. I would like to close this—thank you all for your participation, and thank all of you—but I would like to close by putting this issue even in a larger context if I might, just to close.

To me, having an accurate census is a big part of having a strategy for racial reconciliation in America and building one American community that works. Why? Because if people feel they're undercounted, and they don't get—their children don't get the help they need, whether it's an education or health

care or whatever—it will breed, inevitably, a sense of resentment, a sense of unfairness, a sense that people aren't really part of the mainstream and the future. And this is really important.

I know a lot of people think I'm obsessed with this, but I think the fact that we are growing more diverse as the world gets smaller is an enormous, enormous asset for the United States in the 21st century if we really live together on terms of the quality and harmony and cooperation—and if we're growing together, not being split apart.

But if you look at what I have to spend my time doing as your President when I deal with countries around the world, how much of it is dealing with people who are burdened down with group resentments? Why were we all rejoicing when the Irish voted for the peace accord? Because the Catholics and the Protestants had given up their group resentment to work together for a unified future.

What is the problem in Kosovo, a place that most Americans had never heard of before a few months ago? Ethnic Albanians and Serbs fighting over group resentments. What was Bosnia about? The same thing. What is going on in the Middle East? What is the dynamic within India now? It's just all in the news because of the nuclear test, where you have a Hindu party claiming that the Hindus historically have been insufficiently respected and oppressed by the Muslim minority, and you have group resentments.

I mean, this whole world is so full of people's resentments because they think that the group they're a part of is not getting a fair deal from everybody else if they happen to be bigger or richer or whatever.

We have—with all of our problems in America—we have slowly, steadily, surely been able to chip away at all of the those barriers and come together. That, in the end, may be the largest issue of all about the census: Can we succeed in building one America without knowing who we are, how many we are, where we are, and what kind of situation we're living in? I think the answer to that is, it will be a lot harder. And if we do it right, we'll be a lot stronger.

Thank you all, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:40 a.m. at the Magnolia Multi-Service Center. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Lee Brown of Houston; State Senators Mario Gallegos and Rodney Ellis; State Representative Gerard Torres; Jew Don Boney, president, Houston City Council; Robert A. Eckels, Harris County Commissioners Court; and President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico.

Remarks at a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Reception in Houston

June 2, 1998

Thank you so much. First, let me join in thanking Richard and Ginni for welcoming us into their magnificent home and this magnificent art gallery. *[Laughter]* You know, it's amazing how you use clichés year-in and year-out, and sometimes something happens that it gives whole new meaning. This lunch has given a whole new meaning to the Democratic Party as the party of the big tent. *[Laughter]* It's really very, very beautiful, and we're grateful to you.

I want to thank all the Members of Congress who are here, all the candidates for Congress who are here; my great longtime friend Garry Mauro; and Jim Maddox and Ann Richards, who had to go. And I thank you, B.A. Bentsen, for being here, and thanks for giving us a good report on Lloyd.

Ladies and gentlemen, what was just said about Martin Frost is true and then some. Right before I came up here, I was sitting down there, and Mary—*[inaudible]*—asked me about my dog, Buddy. I don't know if you've ever had a Labrador retriever, but they're smart, and they're loving, but, Lord, are they insistent. *[Laughter]* And about once a day my dog comes into the White House, to the Oval Office, and he'll go in the back room—he knows where all his toys are—and he'll sort through his toys, and he'll go get his ball, and he comes and throws the ball down at my feet. And you know, I could be talking to Boris Yeltsin on the phone—*[laughter]*—but he doesn't care. He just starts barking. *[Laughter]* The whole Federal budget could be an issue. Buddy doesn't care. He just starts barking. *[Laughter]* And he'll keep right on barking until I go out and throw that ball with him for a while.